

Aid agencies prepare to tackle desperate situation in Liberia

International aid workers are stepping up programmes in Liberia following the ousting of president Charles Taylor, but the humanitarian situation throughout the war-torn country remains desperate.

Taylor finally headed into exile in Nigeria on 11 August following weeks of intense international pressure.

Debbie Baglole, health advisor to the UK medical charity MERLIN, told the *Bulletin*: "The next few weeks will be critical. We want to be optimistic but we don't expect there to be calm throughout the country immediately." Aid agencies are now (13 August) preparing to move into the rest of Liberia.

"The situation inside Monrovia is bad but it is bound to be a lot worse in the rest of the country where there has been no access to any health services in the past weeks of the fighting," said Debbie Baglole. "There are a lot of trauma victims in the rest of the country and people are likely to be exhausted and malnourished."

Aid agencies are describing the humanitarian crisis in Monrovia as acute. Three attacks on the capital by the LURD rebels since June trapped 250 000 people who had sought refuge in the city. They are living next to rivers of sewage and infestations of maggots. Drinking-water supplies have run out in most parts of the capital. Diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea and malaria have already claimed many lives.

"The situation is desperate," said Wubeshet Woldemariam, country director of the International Rescue Committee, which has two clinics in the capital. "More than 40% of the Liberians seeking IRC health services have malaria and our clinics are seeing a sharp increase of cases of diarrhoea and cholera."

In addition there are severe food shortages. A survey by the French aid agency Action Contre la Faim revealed that about 30% of children under five are suffering from malnutrition. Prices

have also risen dramatically, with a cup of rice, the staple food, up by 700% since June.

Debbie Baglole said she was starting to see cases of measles, and getting children vaccinated against it was now a major priority. She said there were also a lot of cases of respiratory infection particularly in the under five-year-olds.

A senior United Nations relief official led an 11-person team into the capital this week in an effort to accelerate efforts to get desperately needed food to thousands of people crowding the capital's streets. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) are sending in supplies of high-energy biscuits and oral rehydration salts in an attempt to help the large numbers of street children who have no access to food or water.

"The situation for children in the streets of Monrovia is absolutely horrifying and even desperate," said Damien Personnaz, a spokesperson for UNICEF. "They are in a situation where they have no choice. Either they die from exhaustion through lack of nourishment or they die from the bullets of child soldiers enrolled in two rival factions."

The Disasters Emergency Committee has launched an appeal in the UK to coordinate the relief work of 11 agencies including Oxfam, Save the Children and British Red Cross. Chief executive Brendan Gormley, said: "The appalling conditions caused by the climax of the bloody civil war in Liberia will lead to widespread deaths without an urgent increase in the aid effort." ■

Jacqui Wise, *Cape Town*

Tobacco control begins to take hold in the Philippines

Restaurants and bars that allow smoking now risk being closed by the city authorities in Manila's business district. This tough new approach is a direct result of Republic Act 9211, which regulates "the packaging, use, sale, distribution and advertisement of

tobacco products" and was passed on 23 June 2003. The act is a milestone for the Philippines and ends a 13-year deadlock on public health policy between the two houses of Congress.

The new legislation was sponsored by Senator Juan Flavio Velasco, a former Secretary of Health, and conforms to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, adopted by the World Health Assembly in May 2003. It covers some of the most contentious aspects of the treaty: bans on advertising, promotion and sponsorship, and labelling.

Previous attempts to regulate tobacco through legislation included the Consumer Act of 1991, which required clearly visible health warning labels on tobacco products. Its implementation was delayed by a case filed by the tobacco lobby against the government until the Supreme Court finally ruled in favour of the Department of Health in 2001.

A number of cities and municipalities have also enacted ordinances and regulations to support tobacco control, some of them introducing enforcement procedures that are more stringent than the national law. In Manila's business district of Makati, for example, senior citizens have been deputized to enforce the ban on smoking in public places.

The act has also given an impetus to the banning of smoking in government health facilities and government offices.

The next step for the Philippines will be to increase tobacco taxes and possibly to use the revenue from taxes for health promotion. New legislation in this direction is being discussed, following the examples of Malaysia, Thailand and the state of Victoria in Australia.

Within the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Philippines will have an important role to play in the debate over exempting tobacco products from the removal of tariffs on products produced within ASEAN. ■

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